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Undefeated: A sports film that highlights 'agape'

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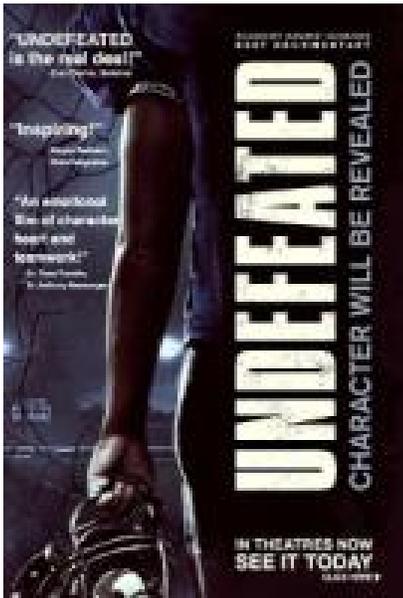
NCR Today

The nation, indeed the world, is enthralled by Jeremy Lin, the undrafted humble Harvard underdog who has stunned the NBA and the New York Knicks with his performances on the basketball court these last couple of weeks.

But hidden in the deep South, somewhere around the decrepit environs of North Memphis, Tenn., a high school football team struggles to succeed just as it did in 2010 when The Tigers, the school's football team, for the first time in the school's 110 year history, made it to the playoffs.

'Undefeated' is an Oscar-nominated feature-length documentary about that team that entralls from the first two minutes. I admit, I was not enthusiastic about reviewing another sports film, let alone football.

Now I can say that I understand why people see football as a religion -- in a good way. Why? Because over the six years that the chubby white volunteer coach Bill Courtney guided this team, they prayed, fought, asked forgiveness, and lived genuine 'agape' as a community.



The team, and Coach Bill and his assistants, grew as men. The younger men learning character through academic and physical limitations as well as in the case of Chavis, severe behavioral problems bordering on disorder.

Bill Courtney -- a husband, father of four and business owner -- grew up in a single parent home, his father having left when he was four. Most of the kids in this film are being raised by grandmothers and mothers; there are few black men present except at school.

Bill and the team shared this common experience and as football saved Bill, he was convinced that football would be a way out for the teens he coached over six years. At the very least they would finish high school and be men of character, ready to take responsibility for their actions.

There is a feel of 'The Blind Side' to the film because one of the well-off white coaches takes in the 300lb right tackle that colleges are courting, to tutor him so he can get a scholarship to play football.

The community complains about this; why choose one kid when there are so many that need help? Because, says the coach, when you see a student athlete with such great ability and a chance to move out of this place and build a life, you want to help him.

Money or Montrail, knows he is too small to play college football but he has heart. An injury at the beginning of the season sidelines him until you have to see the film and find out. What happens to Money will renew your belief in humanity. Talk about humble greatness. There's a lot of that in this film.

Chavis is more problematic but never static. His anger is so deep that he gets suspended from the team for a few weeks, but not expelled, because after missing two years while doing time in a youth penitentiary, football is about all he has going for him.

I loved 'The Blind Side,' don't get me wrong. I love the film 'Hoosiers' and 'Rudy' and 'Remember the Titans' and the little film about women's basketball 'The Mighty Macs.' But this is a documentary that was made during Coach Bill's last year, 2009-2010. He was moving on to be there for his own sons' football games, and to coach at their schools.

No one knew at the beginning how the year would end. And this is why you should see this film.

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When a reporter asks O.C. what he wants to study in college he says, "Education; I want to be a coach. I want to be a caring coach."

Bill swears and sweats with the best of them, but when the team gathers after each game to pray the "Our Father" you can feel the grace pouring over them.

If you see this film and don't like it as much as I do, let me know and I will say an "Our Father" for your intentions. And if you really don't like it, I'll pray a rosary.

Now do you believe me?

"If you let it," said Coach Bill, "Football will save your life."

"The character of a man is not how he handles success but how he handles failure."

The coach wants his men to become leaders, uncommon men who do what is right, who choose to do things for others over self. And this last point is the make or break moment between boys and men.

Opens Friday, February 17 in New York and Los Angeles and rolls out nationwide in the following weeks.

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